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ABSTRACT

A college-level course about the effects of television on children and the process of social policy formation is described in terms of pedagogical goals, strategies, and perspectives. The proposed course of instruction focuses on three primary areas of study: (1) child-related issues; (2) television-related issues; and (3) policy-related issues. The discussion of child-related issues centers on development of an understanding of the ways in which children watch and learn from television. Discussion of message-related issues deals with the nature and extent of portrayals that hold important implications for possible adverse effects on child viewers, the structure and economics of the broadcast industry, and the intersection of child characteristics and television content. Policy-related issues center on development of an understanding of the fundamental structure of broadcast regulation, on familiarizing students with a historical perspective on past policy actions in the area of children and television, and on the examination of current issues under consideration by policymakers. Instructional resources are identified, and assignments in each of the three primary areas of study are described. (RH)

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TELEVISION, CHILDREN, AND SOCIAL POLICY:

PEDAGOGICAL PERSPECTIVES

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Many areas of child development research can be tied to important social policy issues. In some topical domains, the linkages are clearer than in others. Research on the effects of television on children is a realm in which a large proportion of the studies conducted hold direct policy implications. In fact, many of the questions addressed over the years in television effects studies have been chosen specifically because of their ties to current policy concerns.

This presentation is designed to share pedagogical goals, strategies, and perspectives that can usefully be employed to teach students about television, children, and social policy. As such study integrates contributions from the academic fields of media and communication studies, human development and psychology, and political science and policy studies (although this list is hardly comprehensive), there are many different approaches to be pursued. Each instructor must of course take into account the relevant background that students bring with them. For example, students majoring in communications may already be knowledgeable about the fundamentals of broadcast policy and regulation, but be unfamiliar with the limited capabilities and special needs of children. Conversely, students in human development or psychology programs may find themselves in just the opposite circumstance. Course structure and goals will necessarily vary according to the academic perspective in which any class is grounded.

Structure and goals

Based upon our experiences teaching students of communication, human development, and psychology, we have arrived at a

general framework for a course devoted exclusively to the topic of children, television, and social policy. The format includes three primary areas of study: child-related issues, television message-related issues, and policy-related issues.

Child related issues. The first topic that is examined, that of child-related issues, centers on developing an understanding of how children watch and learn from television. There are important age-related differences to be considered, as the same content may deliver a much different meaning for a preschool than an older elementary school-aged child, depending upon their relevant cognitive abilities.

General knowledge about children's information processing skills can be specifically applied to the tasks involved in the interpretation of television messages, including both programming and advertising messages. A rich body of research examining young children's attention to and comprehension of various types of television content has now been produced. By studying this literature, students develop a useful foundation for understanding the types of effects that can be expected from children's exposure to television.

Finally, an examination of children's television usage patterns is also included. Because much policy concern centers on young children's exposure to certain types of objectionable content, it is important for students to develop an awareness of the types of programs children tend to view as well as the overall amount of their television exposure.

Message-related issues. The second area examined, that of message-related factors, includes the study of several different topics. The first deals with the nature and extent of certain types of portrayals that hold important implications for possible adverse effects on child-viewers. Quantitative content analyses of the more pervasive types of messages found on television, such as violence and aggression or gender-stereotyping, help provide students with a more structured perspective on the content television delivers.

It is also useful to introduce students to the structure and economics of the broadcast industry. By educating students about commercial broadcasters' need to attract the largest possible audience for their programming, it is easier for them to see why the needs and interests of children may receive short shrift in the competitive television marketplace. In this way, students can begin to develop a framework for understanding why certain types of messages are prevalent on television, rather than simply learning what the predominant messages are.

Another important aspect of the study of message-related issues involves the integration of material from the first unit, child-related issues, with the material covered regarding the content delivered on television. Such integration can lead to the prediction of specific effects of television exposure on children. Particular theoretical perspectives such as social learning can be employed to predict the anti-social consequences of exposure to television violence as well as the beneficial outcomes of viewing more pro-social content.

By studying the topic of effects using the multi-step process suggested, students can gain a more complete picture of the issues that must be addressed in any policy decisions regarding children and television. Rather than conceptualizing content as merely an independent variable that generates effects on child-viewers, students also develop an awareness of the factors that shape the nature of television, in a sense conceptualizing the content itself as a dependent variable. This perspective is an important one for considering policy alternatives designed to resolve problems associated with certain aspects of children's use of television.

Policy-related issues. Once the foundation provided by the previous two topic areas has been established, students are ready to tackle the policy questions surrounding children's interaction with television. Three principal learning goals are typically pursued at this point. The first deals with developing an understanding of the fundamental structure of broadcast regulation.

Under the Communications Act of 1934, the principal law governing television in the U.S., broadcast channels are allocated to those applicants deemed most likely to serve the "public convenience, interest, or necessity" (47 U.S.C. § 307a). This regulatory approach is known as the "trusteeship" model because those granted licenses to broadcast are viewed as trustees of the publicly-owned airwaves. Each licensee accepts the general obligation to serve the public interest, with the more specific elements of this obligation determined by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC).

This model has predominated since the birth of television in this country, but it is increasingly being challenged by an alternative regulatory perspective that emphasizes unbridled marketplace competition as the best means to insure the public interest is served. The first instructional goal in the policy realm consists of introducing students to the fundamental differences between these two alternative perspectives and then considering their implications for resolving the specific issues raised in the area of children's television policy.

The second goal focuses on familiarizing students with an historical perspective on past policy actions in the area of children and television. Research has often played a prominent role in the policy-making process (at least insofar as raising policy issues if not contributing to their resolution), as have public interest groups such as Action for Children's Television (ACT). The influence of research and the role played by public interest groups can be evaluated through a review of the important policy actions and decisions that have evolved over the years. These include: Congressional hearings on television violence in the 1960s and 1970s; attempts to implement stringent children's programming requirements in the 1970s and 1980s; attempts to ban or severely restrict television advertising to children in the 1970s; and attempts to enhance the more positive effects of television on children through educational programming initiatives, proposals for a national endowment for children's television, and similar ventures.

The third area of study in the policy realm, and the one

that is consistently the most popular with students, involves the examination of current issues under consideration by policy-makers. While the pertinent content naturally varies from time to time, there is rarely any shortage of children's television policy proposals. Legislation on the topic has been introduced in every Congress throughout the 1980s, and regulatory proceedings at federal agencies such as the FCC still occur, although the outcomes now consistently fail to establish any new policies of benefit to children.

A current example. An interesting case that deals with children and television advertising policy is presently pending before the FCC. In this proceeding, the agency is reconsidering its 1984 decision to rescind long-standing limits on advertising to children. That decision was reached when the Commission determined that an inherent marketplace mechanism could limit advertising as effectively as regulation, thereby negating the need for formal government restrictions. As a result, the FCC deregulated all policies limiting the amount of advertising for audiences of children or adults.

The FCC held that if a station exceeded people's tolerance for advertising, viewers would become annoyed, causing the size of the audience to drop. Advertising revenue would then decline (because it is proportional to audience size) and the broadcaster would ultimately be forced by economic considerations to reduce the number of commercials in order to win back the audience. The merits of this argument remain an open question as applied to audiences of adults. However, a substantial body of research

evidence suggests it is inherently flawed as applied to children.

Most children below about 5 years of age lack the ability to consistently discriminate between programs and commercials, making it extremely unlikely such viewers would be capable of recognizing a substantial increase in advertising. Furthermore, there is little reason to expect that even those who could perceive such an increase would react aversively, as children up to the middle elementary-school years tend to have positive attitudes toward television commercials for child-oriented products. Thus, research suggests that the FCC's marketplace logic is unlikely to work to limit television advertising to children. Developments in the broadcast industry corroborate this viewpoint. Advertising levels during children's programs have increased markedly since the previous limits were rescinded.

In deregulating its advertising policies, the FCC clearly failed to consider the special needs and limited capabilities of children. As part of the process of reconsidering the decision, an action ordered by the U.S. Court of Appeals (in a case filed by the public interest group Action for Children's Television), the agency has now solicited comments from researchers. A brief prepared by the American Psychological Association summarized the relevant research and argued strongly for a reinstatement of the rules for children. The FCC is presently weighing a decision in the case.

Proceedings such as this one provide excellent case studies where the use of social science research in public policy-making can be clearly examined. The fact that students can follow the

progress of such cases and actually watch the outcome emerge seems to add tremendously to the value of the learning experience. Other such opportunities come along frequently in the children's television domain and can add greatly to students' interest in the course.

Resources

There are a substantial number of scholarly books and articles examining the topic of children and television policy. One of the most widely-used undergraduate texts for general children and television courses, The Early Window by Robert Liebert and Joyce Sprafkin, includes substantial emphasis on policy issues. For the enterprising instructor who is willing to prepare a specially-tailored collection of readings for photocopying, we have provided a bibliography of materials on policy issues that may prove helpful.

One type of resource that is readily available but often overlooked by most instructors is the actual government documents and decisions that are the basis for specific policy decisions. There is no substitute for gaining an understanding of the logic and reasoning that underlies a decision than reading it in its original form. Surprisingly, FCC rulings make for very interesting reading because their format incorporates an explanation of the rationale underpinning the action taken, as well as a summary of alternative viewpoints and the reasoning behind their dismissal. These decisions are published in both the Federal Register and FCC Reports, which are available in most major libraries throughout the country.

Similarly, Congressional hearing transcripts are a valuable resource. They often provide students with views and perspectives that are unrepresented in the academic literature, such as the First Amendment arguments proposed by broadcasters in opposition to virtually any children's television regulation. Not only are the transcripts valuable for this added perspective, but they can make for lively reading in certain passages where acrimonious exchanges have ensued between witnesses and members of Congress who disagree on an issue.

The primary drawback to this particular resource involves problems with access. Delays in publication are common and most transcripts take as much as a year to reach print. Worse still, there is no systematic distribution mechanism for obtaining copies of hearing transcripts. The best source for obtaining copies expediently is the office of the Congressional Committee or Subcommittee responsible for the hearing.

Assignments

In the first topic area, that of child-related issues, learning goals center on understanding the ecology of children's use of television. Unfortunately, actual observation of children is difficult to arrange in most cases. As an alternative, students can be assigned the task of constructing a weekly diary of what an "average" child-viewer of different ages (e.g., 3-5 and 9-10 years) would be likely to watch, given the available options listed in a local TV Guide. This allows students to translate their knowledge of children's overall amount of viewing, viewing patterns during different times of day, and program-type viewing

patterns into a clearer picture of children's actual exposure to specific television content. Many students seem to assume that child-viewers watch only children's programs, which is hardly the case. This assignment provides an awareness of the full measure of programs children are likely to see, given our knowledge of their general viewing behavior.

The second topic area, message-related issues, can incorporate assignments designed to familiarize students with current children's programming. A useful means of accomplishing this goal is to have students conduct a content analysis project. For example, the nature and extent of violence in children's cartoons can be explored. One of many possible strategies would be to compare Saturday morning network content with programs provided on weekdays by non-network stations. The latter content would typically comprise a larger proportion of children's overall television exposure than would Saturday morning programs and tends to feature more violent portrayals.

Another alternative would involve comparing the amount of advertising on children's programs with the amount presented during prime-time or other adult-oriented programming periods. The nature of the persuasive appeals in adult and child-oriented commercials can also be examined and yields interesting findings. Frameworks for accomplishing content analyses such as these can easily be constructed after consulting related research. Examples are listed in the attached bibliography.

Finally, in the policy area, two types of projects are useful to employ. The first is to conduct a mock Congressional

hearing in which students role-play the parts of the various participants. A hearing can be built around almost any issue in the children's television area, as few have yet been effectively resolved. One example would involve consideration of a proposal that each broadcaster provide a minimum amount of educational children's programming.

A hearing's focus should not simply be limited to conceptual issues, such as demonstrating the need for children's educational programming. It is worthwhile to include operational issues as well, such as assessing how the required educational content could be defined and who would evaluate whether certain programs fulfilled the obligation. By forcing students to grapple with operational issues, shallow idealism may be displaced by an increasing appreciation of the hard decisions involved in constructing and implementing actual public policies. It is important to point out that policy formation is based as much on values and logistical constraints as on relevant empirical evidence documenting the need for action.

A second type of assignment would be a policy briefing paper. For this project, students can review a legislative proposal found in a hearing transcript or the Congressional Record and then evaluate its merits. Given the relevant research evidence, is there a need for the bill? What are the arguments for and against the legislation? Will the proposed policy actually resolve the problem it is designed to address? These questions can be addressed as though the student is a Congressional staff member to add to the authenticity of the assignment.

Conclusion

The topic of children and television is an important one within many academic domains. While perspectives on the study of this subject may vary from one discipline to another, all are likely to be concerned with the public policies that play an important role in shaping children's interaction with the medium. A course such as the one outlined can provide students with two important types of knowledge. One is grounded in content, the other in process.

Students who study television, children, and social policy will become familiar with the research examining viewing effects associated with children's use of this prominent mass medium. This material, along with knowledge gained about past decisions regarding children's television policy, provides students with important content learning from the course. But another important type of learning involves the understanding that is gained about the policy-making process.

Many students will be surprisingly unfamiliar with the intracacies of how a bill becomes law, or how federal regulatory agencies exercise their power. The in-depth examination of specific cases in the children's television realm often provides some useful insights, if not basic knowledge, about how these processes generate policy outcomes. More importantly, through developing an understanding of the policy-making process, students can come to appreciate why certain types of policy outcomes occur while others do not. This type of knowledge can be translated into much broader applications than merely children's television and is also an important outcome of the course.

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